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ABSTRACT

This guide is essentially designed to help the reader answer for himself the question: What are the Vietnamese like? It will prove useful to sponsors, teachers, other education officials, workers in voluntary agencies and those in state and federal agencies dealing with Vietnamese refugees. The refugees now live in a society which is almost diametrically the opposite of their own. Cross cultural misunderstandings and conflicts are bound to occur. This report discusses the following traits which appear to be common to the Vietnamese people: industriousness, a love of learning, humanism, a desire for harmony, a pluralistic approach to life, a need for a sense of permanence, and a lack of a spirit of unity. These traits are compared with some typically American cultural traits. (CPM)

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Indochinese Refugee Education Guides

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#13

GENERAL INFORMATION SERIES: Perspectives on a Cross-Cultural Problem —
Getting to Know the Vietnamese

Introduction

Ever since the Vietnamese refugees arrived in the U.S. in May 1975, many Americans have expressed a great interest in getting to know them better. Sponsors have wanted to know what Vietnamese are like so as to avoid friction and misunderstandings while the refugees were temporarily living with them in their homes. Teachers and other education officials have wanted information on the 'cultural background' of the Vietnamese refugee children to help them adjust more easily to the new environment of the American school. Workers in voluntary agencies, as well as those in state and federal agencies dealing with the refugees, have wanted to know about the 'Vietnamese value system' in order to devise more effective resettlement programs.

This Refugee Education Guide deals with the most frequently-asked questions about the Vietnamese people and their culture. Essentially it is designed to help you answer for yourself, in some measure, the difficult question which you may have asked: What are the Vietnamese like? It contains, after careful selection and close examination, many frequently-made observations and remarks about the Vietnamese, by non-Vietnamese, as well as by the Vietnamese themselves. In its effort to collect, analyze and disseminate information on the cultural traits of the Vietnamese, the National Indochinese Clearinghouse has taken part in nearly a dozen workshops and conferences where this subject was discussed. It has also benefited greatly in the past year from a massive body of diverse information on the Vietnamese refugees arising out of the nearly 15,000 telephone calls received on its Education Hot Line from both Americans and Vietnamese all over the nation. It is hoped that, with all this disparate information now sorted out, selected and condensed in one bulletin, some perspectives can be given on the special cross-cultural problem of getting to know the Vietnamese.

On the subject of getting to know an individual, the Vietnamese have an interesting saying:

Đi lâu mới biết đường dài,
Ở lâu mới biết con người phải chăng.

Just as the length of a road is known only by actually traveling on it,
The qualities of a man are known only by living with him for a long time.

It is useful to keep in mind this little point of wisdom from the Vietnamese when, as Americans, we seek to understand them by our various means. Our intentions may always be sincere, but our means — like this small bulletin — cannot be but inadequate by the Vietnamese yardstick of the above-mentioned popular saying.

Vietnamese Through the Eyes of Vietnamese

Following are English translations of excerpts from the book Người Việt, Đất Việt (Vietnamese People, Vietnamese Land) by Cửu-Long-Giang and Toan-Anh; 528 pages Nam Chi Tùng Thư Publishers; Saigon, 1967:

"....Vietnamese are an intelligent people. They possess a keen sense of observation which gives them the ability to grasp things quickly; it also gives them a tendency to imitate others. Short on a sense of innovation, they tend to hang on to old and established ways. They are skillful with their hands and love to outsmart each other in small petty matters, an inclination which often leads to craftiness. They have a mocking sense of humor which can sometimes degenerate into disparagement.

"Vietnamese have a high regard for morality and uphold the five Confucian virtues of humanity, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness as guides for their daily conduct. They love book-study and have avid minds.

"Ordinarily giving an appearance of being shy and afraid, they value peace and harmony in all relations. However, when they are faced with danger, or are on the battle field, they display great bravery and know how to maintain discipline, giving death itself as much weight as an airborne thistledown. Often motivated by compassion for others, they have a strong sense of gratitude.

"Vietnamese also have several serious flaws in their character. They are a

shallow people who are also boastful. They lack patience and attach great importance to surface appearance. They yearn for status, fame and fortune, love fun and the gay life, and like to gamble for money. They believe in ghosts and spirits, and worship gods and deities. They are arrogant and love to brag.

"...A most admirable trait in the Vietnamese, however, is the love they have for their country. It is this strong attachment to their native land that has helped them, several times in the course of their history, to liberate their country from domination by their northern neighbor, China; in the last hundred years, it has enabled them to keep up a relentless struggle against French colonialists...."

This rare description of the Vietnamese character by two Vietnamese cultural historians, interesting as it might be, gives us only a quick glimpse of what Vietnamese are like. The brief description will have to be elaborated on and complemented by other sources before a balanced and useful picture can emerge.

A Trait Called 'tính cần cù'

When asked to comment on the major characteristics of their people, many Vietnamese often mention 'tính cần cù'. From the sometimes lengthy descriptions given for it, its closest English equivalent seems to be 'industriousness'. But Vietnamese say that 'tính cần cù' is more than being industrious, pointing out that Americans are also an industrious people but are not regarded as having this trait. It seems to be a combination of thrift, industriousness, patience, determination and endurance that allows a Vietnamese farmer to plough his field all day under the hot sun, walking slowly behind his water-buffalo, ankle-deep in the mud of the rice paddy. It is also, they insist — recalling the recent Vietnam war — the trait that allowed a whole army to be supplied bit by bit, ant-like, by provisions carried on the backs of men and women who had to travel on foot hundreds of miles over perilous jungle trails. Seen through American eyes, 'tính cần cù' is perhaps the quiet willingness to do things the hard way when the hard way is the only way possible.

There are indications from America's experience in Vietnam, as well as from direct observations of the refugees' behavior in the U.S., that there is validity in this self-image on the part of the Vietnamese. And leaders of refugee groups, as well as Vietnamese intellectuals writing in various refugee publications in

the U.S., are unanimous in seeing in this quality the source of strength and resiliency that will eventually allow the refugees to pull themselves up slowly but surely by their own bootstraps.

Love of Learning

'Tánh hiếu học', which literally translates as 'love of learning' is another trait which is frequently mentioned as a characteristic of the Vietnamese people. Another image which the Vietnamese have of themselves, 'tánh hiếu học' needs to be examined more closely, if for no other reason than the fact that no people of any culture ever describes itself as harboring a hate of learning.

What the Vietnamese mean by 'love of learning' should not conjure up the picture of a small nation where there are great libraries and where the literacy rate is one hundred per cent. Nor should it bring to mind the image of great scholars and scientists devoting their entire lives to the pursuit of knowledge and the investigation of things, even though 'investigation of things', or 'cách vật', is one of the eight main precepts in the Confucian classic 'Đại Học', or Great Learning, one of the several Chinese classics that have exerted a profound influence on Vietnamese cultural life.

The love of learning which the Vietnamese talk about is actually a traditional, deep, and almost subconscious respect for the learned and their learning. Until the early 1900's, this respect for learning was embodied in the traditional scholar with his long tunic, long finger nails and scraggly beard, sitting on an ornate straw mat with his Chinese classics and his calligraphic writings beside him.

Perhaps the Vietnamese attitude toward learning is best exemplified by the documented story of the illiterate old farm woman who took a sheet of rice paper away from her grandson and reverently burned it because it had calligraphic writing on it, rather than let the little boy desecrate it by making it into a kite for his own entertainment.

Western observers — French and American — see this Vietnamese 'love of learning' as a strong veneration of book-study, much more than a dynamic Faustian drive "to strive, to seek, and never to yield" in the pursuit of knowledge, which is more commonly associated with the peoples of the Western world. American

educators familiar with education programs in Vietnam have often observed that the Vietnamese child's style of learning tends to be of the passive variety rather than the active. The child has been reported to rely more on listening, watching and imitating than on experimenting, trying things out, and generally discovering things for himself by himself. Perhaps this is what the cultural historians Cùu-Long-Giang and Toan-Anh meant, too, when they remarked that Vietnamese had a "tendency to imitate others", and that they were "short on the sense of innovation".

Vietnamese love to point out, as evidence of their deep respect for learning, the fact that high-level administrators of the country used to be sought exclusively among talented scholars who were chosen for their high public offices through grueling competitive examinations styled after the Confucian examinations in China and administered directly by the imperial court. Many American officials with service in Vietnam have noted that even though the imperial examinations themselves were abolished in the early 1900's after the opening of the country to Western influence, the preference for scholars to serve in high positions is still strong in modern-day Vietnam.

There are positive as well as negative aspects to this deep respect for learning. The high value placed on learning tends to make the Vietnamese student a hard-working one, and the high regard for the learned tends to make him place his teacher on a higher level of respect than his American counterpart would. But when learning is equated with book study and is devoid of any serious concern for practical experience — which seems to be the observation of most non-Vietnamese familiar with Vietnamese culture — the consequences can be serious. These observers have pointed out that it is not unusual to find young Ph.D.'s schooled in the West, with not a single day of administrative experience, appointed to run vast and complex government agencies. So it is well to remember that this "love of learning" on the part of the Vietnamese can range from an enlightened and healthy respect for scholarship to a blind veneration of the learned and everything connected with book-learning, an attitude more commonly found among the less-educated masses.

If this cultural trait is preserved by the refugees in their new life in America — and several thoughtful observers have recently expressed doubt that it will not be affected in some degree by the cultural transplanting undergone by the refugees — it is reasonable to expect a very positive attitude on the part

of the refugee parents regarding the education of their children. And, as has been reportedly the case of the Chinese Americans, a good proportion of the Vietnamese refugee children can be expected, in time, to find their way into American universities and colleges, propelled there by, among other things, this special 'love of learning' which their parents brought with them to America as part of their cultural baggage.

Heart Versus Mind

American difficulties in Vietnam during the period of American involvement there have been seen by specialists in cross-cultural communication as being the result of a pernicious conflict between a 'heart-oriented culture', the Vietnamese, and a 'mind-oriented culture', the American. Even though we have to take into account the special blinders put on these experts by their professional discipline which tend to make them see things in the light of cross-cultural differences alone, their opinion is well worth a closer examination.

If 'heart' is understood to be feelings, sentiments and emotions which motivate people's behavior independently of the dictate of reason or rationality — what the Vietnamese themselves refer to as 'tình' or 'tình cảm' — then it is safe to say that the Vietnamese are, indeed, a heart-oriented people. There seems to be a distinctive predilection among the Vietnamese for literature and music that are deeply sentimental and sad. Kim-vân-kiều, the long poem which is the recognized centerpiece of Vietnamese literature and which is said by experts on Vietnamese literature to portray the very soul of the Vietnamese people, is, in fact, the story of a beautiful young woman, buffeted by the vicissitudes of life, lamenting her hapless fate. Tough Vietnamese rangers, fresh out of battle, were reportedly seen sitting rapt and moist-eyed through ballads of unrequited loves and untimely bereavements sung by pretty singers in Saigon cabarets. And the Vietnamese classical musical form of 'Vọng Cổ', greatly appreciated by the masses, is described by Vietnamese musicologists to have a hauntingly sad quality that "seems to mirror a deeply sentimental mood in the depth of the Vietnamese soul". While most Americans tend to shy away from sentimentalism, the Vietnamese seem to be drawn to it and absorbed in it. Feeling sorry for oneself, indulging in self-pity, moping in one form or another — something most Americans are inclined to resist — is frequently given in to by the Vietnamese. 'Tủi phận' or 'lamenting one's fate' is the term they have for it.

But the term 'heart-oriented culture' means more than the superficial

appearance of sensitive emotionalism or subtle sentimentalism that the Vietnamese are prone to. On a philosophical level, it means a characteristic and pervading humanism which permeates and gives distinctiveness to the whole culture. Throughout their cultural history there seems to be among the Vietnamese more preoccupation with man than with nature. There is more interest in how man feels, reacts and transacts with one another than how nature functions or how things in his physical environment operate. Thinking is directed towards morals and ethics and the formulation of rules of conduct for man, rather than towards the physical environment and the discovery of laws and principles that govern the operation of nature. It's 'Western' science, but it's 'Oriental' wisdom, in the Vietnamese lexicon. Taoism, a philosophical system which seeks to define a place for man in relation to the universe, and Confucianism, which suggests an avenue to sagehood and an ethical code of conduct for man in relation to his society, both found ready acceptance among the Vietnamese when these intensely humanistic philosophies spread south to Vietnam from China early in Vietnamese cultural history.

It is perhaps indicative of this deep-seated orientation toward man that Vietnamese have singled out the three humanistic philosophies of Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism, grouped them together, and called them 'Tam Giáo', 'The Three Teachings'. And Vietnamese intellectuals are often heard proudly describing their culture as 'nhân bản', or 'rooted in man'.

On the level of social organization, this 'heart-based' culture also translates into a society which is basically run by men, with their individual idiosyncrasies, their strengths and weaknesses, rather than by a fair but impersonal system of laws that is actively adhered to and absolutely enforced, although, of course, a Vietnamese code of laws exists. A Vietnamese refugee in Virginia was recently observed deliberately running a red light as he was slowly driving home from work late one night. When asked by his American friend riding with him why he did not stop, he replied: "The street is deserted." Practical considerations and social conditioning of public behavior aside, the American felt that there were philosophical implications in that act, because "My concept of law is such that, even on a deserted street, I would instinctly have stopped, even if only for a few seconds." he said. While it is dangerous to make too much of this common incident, it might explain to some extent why many non-Vietnamese observers have described the Vietnamese concept of authority as being 'personalized' rather than 'depersonalized' or institutionalized. Authority is more readily recognized when it has a human face, and the law is understood better when it is represented

by a man. And, as was frequently observed by foreign diplomats in Vietnam, allegiance, political or otherwise, is usually to a man much more than to an abstract principle or ideal. The do-it-yourself concept of income tax computation and payment in the U.S., which involves no tax collector carrying a collection bag, is an example of depersonalized, faceless law that a person-oriented Vietnamese refugee might find easy to understand but difficult to handle in the proper way.

But nowhere is the high value the Vietnamese place on 'heart' or feelings and sentiments more obvious than in the interpersonal relations of their everyday life. The former chancellor of Hué University, discussing the problem of assistance to Vietnamese refugees in the U.S. at a symposium on immigration held in San Francisco last year, stated that, for himself as well as for all other Vietnamese refugees, what was given was not as important as how it was given and "the feelings" behind it.

With such a value orientation still very strong in them, there is no doubt that the Vietnamese refugees will have a lot to adjust to if and when they become, through resettlement failures, the objects of faceless institutionalized good will, or the wards of impersonal computerized charity, which this nation, out of necessity, has to practice.

Sensitive observers of the Vietnamese character, like Douglas R. Beane of the Church World Service, feel that this preoccupation with 'heart' to the detriment of 'mind' as represented by reason and logic, is probably the most important factor to remember when one seeks to understand Vietnamese behavior patterns. It helps explain the greater complexity and intensity found in Vietnamese interpersonal relationships, the depth and durability of Vietnamese friendships, and the resiliency of the Vietnamese extended family which has withstood the onslaughts of both modernization and war. A Vietnamese psychologist, speaking as an informant on this subject, felt that, even though this strong value orientation in the Vietnamese toward 'heart', human warmth and the personal was yet to be put to the real test in Vietnam, i.e. the test of rapid modernization and industrialization, it is now being tested daily deep within each and every refugee living in the complex technological web of American society. And only half-jokingly, he said so long as the refugees continued to find ways to celebrate Tét, to commemorate the death anniversaries of their ancestors, and generally to attend to "the affairs of the heart", chances were good that they would not succumb to loss of identity nor to alienation, which is part of life in a technology-oriented society.

Propriety in Interpersonal Relations

It is often pointed out that, compared to Americans, Vietnamese seem to be much more formal in their interpersonal relations. They appear to be more protocol-minded and to place a higher value on decorum, etiquette and ceremony, considerations which Americans tend to dismiss as not so important. An American engineer, sponsoring a Vietnamese refugee family in his home in Maryland, reported that the term 'sir' was used by the group to address him so many times that he nearly went out of his mind. "They've got no business being so formal with me," he said.

This formality in interpersonal relations, which is often insufferable to egalitarian-minded Americans, is actually very deeply rooted in the Vietnamese. Experts in Vietnamese culture see it as an aspect of the Confucian concept of 'lễ' or 'propriety', one of the "five constant virtues" that Confucianists since the 5th century B.C. have believed should "guide the thoughts, deeds and words of the superior man". The Vietnamese word for politeness, 'lễ phép', literally means 'rules of propriety'.

For the Vietnamese ~~in~~ their various everyday encounters, 'propriety' means the almost subconscious and reflex-like application of tacit rules of decorum which are translated into behaviors characteristically Vietnamese. An American teacher of an ESL class for five Vietnamese elementary school children in Arkansas observed that every time one of the children was asked to hand back to her the book used in a pattern drill, he would always give it back to her with both hands, his eyes slightly lowered. Countless other teachers and sponsors have reported that Vietnamese — children and adults alike — are unusually reserved and shy at initial encounters with Americans; it seems as if they were vainly searching in their rule book for the appropriate behavior to adopt toward the Americans who are different from them not only in looks but in behavior as well. 'Propriety' at a loss in a new cultural context!

The notion of "face", which is stereotypically overplayed in many apocryphal anecdotes about the Chinese, is also found to be associated with the Vietnamese. For the Vietnamese — they call it 'thể diện' — the notion of "face" is directly related to their concept of propriety. It is the special case when the dictates of propriety prevail over other considerations such as convenience, good sense, common wisdom or logic. As actually practiced by the Vietnamese, who are also

described as a very practical people, "face" is seen to be not as strong a factor in their daily life as is commonly assumed. And the middle-aged former Vietnamese circuit judge who is now training as an auto mechanic in Virginia may have unwittingly answered for us many questions concerning the Vietnamese, not only about "face" alone, but probably also about other alleged Vietnamese cultural traits such as contempt for manual labor, social class discrimination, etc.

If one knows where to look for it, this deeply-ingrained sense of proper form can be seen in many aspects of Vietnamese life. 'Tôi', the most commonly-used word for 'I' in the Vietnamese language — and there are many others in the lexicon playing the same grammatical function — etymologically has the meaning of 'servant' or 'subordinate'. The simple Anglo-Saxon personal pronoun 'you' has innumerable Vietnamese equivalents ranging from 'ông' (the gentleman) and 'em' (the younger sibling) to 'cụ', to be used only for venerable aged people, and 'ngài', reserved exclusively for kings and other exalted persons.

As is reported by many Americans in Vietnam who had direct contacts with Vietnamese, this notion of propriety can sometimes be observed in behavior which, to Americans used to directness and openness, are downright perplexing. "A Vietnamese 'yes' in word can turn out to be a 'no' in deed," they said. In such instances, the common interpretation of the Vietnamese behavior has usually been that Vietnamese are reluctant to contradict, to disappoint, and generally to cause unease and discomfort in others, which, in itself, would obviously constitute a breach of propriety.

Also translated by Western scholars as 'ceremony' or 'ceremonials', the Confucian concept of 'lễ' involves, too, the observance of formal rites and rituals in many situations, both in the confines of the Vietnamese family and in the larger context of Vietnamese society. In the family, the practice of ancestor worship, for example, which involves the annual rituals commemorating the death anniversary of an ancestor or a deceased family member, is especially notable. Up until 1945, which marked the end of the long Nguyễn dynasty, there was always in the government a Ministry of Rites, called 'Bộ Lễ Nghi'.

So, when you congratulate a Vietnamese for playing the guitar very well and instead of saying 'Thank you' he says with a little embarrassment that he is really not very good at it, you should know that he is not being falsely modest; more likely, he is just being himself, probably reacting to praise in a way which

came, unbeknownst to him and over two milleniums ago, directly from the pages of the Confucian Annalects.

Harmony and the Pluralistic Approach to Life-manship

In surveying our collection of adjectives which writers on Vietnamese culture have used to describe the Vietnamese approach to life, we found such words as eclectic, flexible, adaptive, practical, pragmatic, non-dynamic, non-active, passive, reactive, submissive, indirect, etc. American social scientist Abraham M. Hirsh, an expert in cross-cultural communication and an astute observer of the Vietnamese value system, thinks that the Vietnamese use what he terms a "pluralistic approach to lifemanship", with a strong inclination for eclectic adaptations. In seeking to understand the Vietnamese, all these observations are well worth a closer look.

Still other observers, including many Vietnamese cultural experts, feel that the Taoist concept of harmony plays an important role in the Vietnamese system of values. This, too, needs to be made more intelligible to those who are unfamiliar with Oriental philosophies in general, and with Taoism in particular.

A Vietnamese refugee family clearly identified as Buddhist was visited at their home by a voluntary agency worker around Christmas time last year. The worker reported that right in the middle of the sparsely furnished living-room was a huge Christmas tree with all the trimmings. "Are they really Buddhist?" she asked a Vietnamese friend later, obviously confused. She was even more confused when the friend saw nothing unusual about a Christmas tree in a Buddhist home. This documented case in Washington, D.C. contains in it an element common to hundreds of other cases observed both in Vietnam and among the refugees presently in the U.S. That common element is an observable ability on the part of the Vietnamese not only to hold more than one religious belief — a Vietnamese Catholic also worships his ancestors — but to espouse more than one ideal, accept more than one solution to a problem, attempt more than one course of action, i.e. the legal course, and generally tolerate more than one absolute standard for anything.

In connection with this, Abraham Hirsh says that while Americans use a "monistic" approach to life, adopting only one in every type, class and category, the Vietnamese use a "pluralistic" approach and are comfortable only with a combination, an assortment. Americans seek out the One, the Only and give it respect,

loyalty and devotion; the Vietnamese search for the alternatives, the other possibilities that will prove workable or satisfactory for their needs. Hirsh points out that an American has only one God, is married to one wife, drinks one brand of beer, reads one newspaper and follows one favorite ball team. A Vietnamese may do all that, but never to the exclusion of the other choices.

This Vietnamese search for the other alternatives can, in individual cases, take forms which, to an American, would seem unscrupulous, unethical and reprehensible. A Vietnamese refugee standing near the end of a very long chow line at Camp Indiantown Gap was once observed going to the head of the line to give his meal card to a friend and ask him to get dinner for him ahead of hundreds of others who got in line before he did. Regulations and procedures laid down by Vietnamese government agencies for rendering service to the public were reported by Vietnamese officials to be often subverted by this same public which, anxious to get service, used shortcuts and "the other alternatives" which often took the form of bribes. The old Vietnamese institution of concubinage, which was declared unlawful in the 1950's but which is still practiced by some Vietnamese, including at least two reported cases among the refugees, is seen by some observers in the same light, i.e. preference for a multiplicity of alternatives. And the laxity in the observance of laws which many American officials have noted in Vietnam is seen by these officials as a classic case of a pluralistic culture chafing under a monistically-based mode of governing people. Laws, which prescribe only one avenue as being the legal and acceptable one, are said to collide head-on with the Vietnamese pluralistic tendency to reject the One and the Only and to seek "the other possibilities".

Conrad Arensberg, another American social scientist with an interest in cross-cultural differences, points out that Americans and the peoples in the Western world have a strong tendency to make what he terms "two-fold judgements on principle". These are judgements based on fixed and impersonal principles which assign a thing or an event to one of only two categories, either to a category judged high in value, which is used as a basis for positive action, or to one judged low in value, which is to be rejected, or avoided. These two categories are clear-cut dualisms such as moral-immoral, legal-illegal, success-failure, modern-outmoded, clean-dirty, etc. The difference with a culture like the Vietnamese lies in the fact that although there are also dualisms in their value system, they usually do not rank one term of a dualism absolutely good and superior in strength and value, and thus actionable on principle, and at the same time reject the other, again on principle. There seems to be with them

more willingness to accept a range of relative norms rather than one absolute criterion; and they usually display a higher degree of tolerance that allows for the acceptance of both terms of a dualism. American officials with experience in Vietnam have reported that government corruption, for example, was viewed by the Vietnamese common people with distaste, but the disapproval was rarely very strong and certainly never raised to the level of Arenberg's "two-fold judgement on principle". There seem to be many norms by which to judge an action, and in dealing with right and wrong, although the Vietnamese embrace right, they do not always reject wrong out of hand. It's not that they condone wrong, these Americans say, but they view it with an equanimity that can easily be interpreted as indifference. This may explain the general mood of impatience which, many observers of the American involvement in Vietnam reported, was a frequently-seen feature in the relations between the American technical advisers and the Vietnamese counterparts they advised. "It boils down to a different approach to problem-solving," one insightful former American adviser said. And he recalled with a chuckle Rudyard Kipling's suggestion of an epitaph for an Englishman in Asia: "Here lies a fool who tried to hustle the East."

The dualism of good and evil is viewed by Vietnamese the same ambiguous way. Seen from an American perspective, good and evil seem to be in a state of coexistence in the Vietnamese system, and in this eternal coexistence, each must have its due. As seen by Hirsh, life, for Americans, is a series of Armageddons, great and small, daily to be waged between good and evil, the outcome of which must be the triumph of good. There must always be a winner, and the winner must always be good. For the Vietnamese, there is no Armageddon. The presence of both good and evil is recognized in the Mainstream of Life which is a blend of both. And "lifemanship consists in successfully existing or surviving, as best one can, in that mainstream".

As seen through Western eyes, it is not so much evil or wrong that is condemned; it is excess, a lack of measure, of proportions. This has led many Western observers to draw attention to the importance of 'trung dung', or the Doctrine of the Mean, in Vietnamese behavior. Religious and metaphysical in its essence, as contrasted with Đại Học, or the Great Learning, mentioned earlier, which is ethical and social, the Doctrine of the Mean is embodied in the Chinese classic of the same name attributed to the philosopher Tzu Ssu, 483-402 B.C. A subject of philosophical interpretations and reinterpretations throughout the ages, this doctrine, which exerts a strong influence on the Chinese from the beginning and later on on the Vietnamese, sees sincerity as the Way of all exis-

tence, "absolute, intelligent, and indestructible". It is the basis on which the concept of central harmony is built. As practiced by the Vietnamese as a value orientation, 'trung dung' is commonly understood to be the 'middle path', the avoidance of excess.

In philosophical terms, the inclination on the part of the Vietnamese to refuse to follow just one system or one line has been associated with eclecticism; and their tendency to search out the other alternatives, the working combination, has been labeled syncretism. Syncretism requires an ability to reconcile opposing principles and practices in an effort to make them work harmoniously. Thus, the Vietnamese syncretism is seen to stem from a harmony-orientation.

The concept of harmony originated from Taoism, a philosophy embodied in the Tao-te-Ching, a classic on 'Tao' and 'te', or the "Way" and its "virtue". Commonly attributed to Lao-Tzu, a Chinese philosopher in the 6th century B.C., Taoism, which exerted a strong influence on both Buddhism and Confucianism in China, is believed by Vietnamese cultural historians to have played a very important role in the development of the Vietnamese cultural personality.

Although in its extreme metaphysical abstraction, Tao, or the Way, is the very principle which actuates the physical universe, in its everyday application as a way of life, Tao, or the Way, is naturalism in the sense of "taking no unnatural action". It is the respect of spontaneity and simplicity, "supporting things in their natural state". Also a form of serenity, tranquility and alert quietism, Taoism sets the natural Way in direct opposition to the artificial ways of men, such as regulations, organization, and conventions. The Taoist seeks the realization of self through the achievement of harmony in his emotions, and the natural and harmonious development of all things. Often likened to water or the infant, Tao is strength in weakness. Taoists point out that nothing is weaker than water, but yet it can wear out a rock, the most solid of things; and in the Japanese martial art of judo or hand combat, the approach of which is believed to reflect elements of Taoism, a weak person can easily floor a stronger opponent if, instead of interfering with the latter's great strength, he knows how to go along with it and work with it to his advantage. This, in essence, is the meaning of such cryptic sentences quoted by Taoists, as: "Tao benefits all things but does not compete with them," or "Tao invariably takes no action, and yet there is nothing left undone." Experts believe there are deep cross-cultural implications in this subconscious-level orientation toward non-interference, non-confrontation,

alert passivity, and — to Western eyes — this essentially non-dynamic behavior when, as during the Vietnam war, Americans and Vietnamese have to work closely together. The difference in their respective approaches to work, play, government, problem-solving, etc. can be so great that, if particular care is not taken, it can lead to disaster. Probably this is what cross-cultural communication specialists have in mind when they see American difficulties in Vietnam as essentially stemming from a clash between two radically different cultures, as mentioned earlier. Douglas Pike, author of the book Viet Cong, says that American frustration in Vietnam derived from a "crisis in perception" that originated from "a failure in definition". Frances Fitzgerald, in her book Fire in the Lake, sees the differences between Vietnamese and Americans as being not only quantitative but also qualitative, and that these differences are so great that, for mutual understanding to take place, "one side will have to reconstruct the whole world of the other".

Seen in the light of value orientations, Taoism avoids conflict, and rejects confrontation. It is harmony-oriented. As inculcated into the Vietnamese for over two milleniums, this harmony-orientation is believed to be one of the most prominent features in the Vietnamese character. It is precisely the basis for the use of such characterizations as flexible, non-dynamic, non-active, passive, indirect, etc. which, earlier, we have seen used for the Vietnamese.

A famous South Vietnamese general was once reported to leave the active life and retire to plant orchids in the serenity of his garden, a true Taoist course of action which all Vietnamese understand. Vietnamese refugee children have often been reported to refrain from asking questions of their American teachers even when they do not understand a point being made, refusing to confront the teacher with an unpleasant fact. And as was discussed earlier, if a frank 'no' disturbs propriety or perhaps also jars too much the inner harmony of the emotions, a Vietnamese might give you a 'yes'. Is he being untruthful? It might help matters related to the Vietnamese refugees if, before judging, we stop to think that maybe he is just being a Vietnamese, a prisoner of his own culture just as much as we are prisoners of ours.

A Sense of Permanence

In looking at all the orientation materials prepared by various organizations to help Americans work with the Vietnamese refugees, we notice that nearly all of

them contain a reference about punctuality. In essence, the message is this: 'Due to a different concept of time inherent in their culture, the Vietnamese are usually not very punctual. Try to understand.'

While most experts agree that a different concept of time exists, they feel that actually the difference is not so simple as can be neatly translated into incorrigible tardiness on the part of the Vietnamese. In fact, officials involved in English instruction at the refugee camp at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, reported exactly the opposite. Frequently the students were seen to come to class very early, sometimes an hour ahead of class time. And even though nearly 15,000 telephone calls have been received at the National Indochinese Clearinghouse, all concerning the refugees, not a single one substantiated the initial American concern in this regard. Instances of tardiness, of course, must have occurred. But was it because of a different cultural value, or perhaps just plain unfamiliarity with the bus system?

Rather than being overly concerned about Vietnamese punctuality — a concern which may or may not betray something of our American concept of time — let us look at the observations that have been made about the way the Vietnamese themselves use time. It has been reported by many American sources that personal visits by the Vietnamese usually last longer than that unspecified but clearly felt duration which the American inner clock unerringly detects. The visits are unhurried, relaxed, and, to these Americans' consternation, usually unannounced.

Other indicators of the Vietnamese use of time have also been observed. In their various purchases, the Vietnamese are reported to pay much more attention to durability than Americans would. A Vietnamese man of average means in Washington, D.C. is known to have spent nearly two years looking for a brick house to buy. Newly-arrived Vietnamese in the U.S. are observed to walk considerably more slowly than Americans or Vietnamese who have lived in the U.S. for a long time. In looking for a job, the Vietnamese are reported to give much greater consideration to its permanent nature than Americans. One Vietnamese cultural informant says that Americans and Vietnamese both get impatient with one thing or another; but he feels that comparatively speaking, it takes longer for a Vietnamese to become impatient than for an American. "The Vietnamese cultural clock walks; the American cultural clock runs," he says. It is also a generally known fact that a Vietnamese family lives in a home a considerably longer time than an American family does, and that statistically, Vietnamese marriages last longer.

All these disparate observations and innumerable others made both by Americans and Vietnamese have formed the basis for some insights that can cast light on the basic differences between the two cultures. Many observers feel that the need for a sense of permanence in life, although present in all Americans, is much stronger in the Vietnamese. Customs, traditions, and other things do change, but they change much more slowly with the Vietnamese. The pace of change is more relaxed and is such that Alvin Toffler's notion of future shock is something difficult for the Vietnamese to grasp. One observer remarks that, in this connection, to try to resettle a barefoot Vietnamese fisherman from Quảng Nam in Houston, for example, would be tantamount to asking him to make a quantum jump in time of a century. (Actually, such a jump was made by thousands of Vietnamese whose level of sophistication is about that of a Quảng Nam barefoot fisherman, including, in fact, a number of fishermen. One can only imagine the observable as well as unobservable problems of cross-cultural adjustment on their part.)

The Vietnamese sense of permanence can also be seen in the Vietnamese view of death. A link between the dead and the living is maintained by way of the annual family rituals of commemoration held for each deceased family member. On the day of each commemoration, called 'ky' or 'giỗ', an actual meal — usually more elaborate than an ordinary family meal — is prepared and served on the family altar, where incense and aromatic joss sticks are burned.

There are indications that the Vietnamese conceive of change as being cyclical. Experts often point out the cyclical character of the Vietnamese traditional duo-decimal system of counting years, and the belief, common among the Vietnamese including the non-Buddhist, in reincarnation. One informant surmises that probably the Vietnamese intuitively sense the cyclical nature of the earth's ecology early in their cultural history.

With a cultural clock "walking" rather than "running", a Vietnamese is more accustomed to a day that is less hurried than an American's day. In this sense, it will be some time before the Vietnamese refugees become used to the activity-packed day of life in the U.S.

With a different value placed on time, the Vietnamese refugees can be expected to subordinate time to other "more important" considerations such as 'heart', 'propriety', etc.; and thus, personal visits tend to last longer, and tardiness, if it occurs, may be viewed with less seriousness and righteous indignation by Vietnamese than Americans. This is really what the issue of Vietnamese punctuality is all about.

A Clash of Values

In talks conducted over the past year with hundreds of Vietnamese about their culture, and in the voluminous body of literature written about the Vietnamese over the past twenty years, we have encountered time and again evidence of what amounts to a flaw in the Vietnamese character: difficulty in subordinating personality to rationality in group enterprises. Readily admitted to by almost all the Vietnamese informants we talked to, and abundantly reported on during the Vietnam war by the American press as well as by other sources less interested in political and military implications, this difficulty is often seen to translate into a short sense of mutual cooperation, and a low spirit of unity which the Vietnamese themselves bluntly refer to by the phrase 'thiếu tinh thần đoàn kết', literally 'lack of a spirit of unity'.

It is pointed out to us that the Vietnamese take part in interest groups, associations and organizations much less than Americans do, and the life of those groups tends to be shorter than the American equivalents. "It seems as if the extended family is the only group that really counts for the Vietnamese," an American observer once remarked. Another American informant feels that there seems to be a distinct inability on the part of the Vietnamese to work together harmoniously on anything. This remark, when stripped of its harshness and its pejorative overtone, is felt by several more dispassionate observers to contain a very important clue to the Vietnamese character. The clue lies in the term 'harmoniously'. How is it that a presumably harmony-oriented people cannot work together harmoniously? Either the presumption of a harmony-orientation is wrong, or there must be something else acting against it. The general sense of the answer we have received from many sources is as follows: the harmony-orientation is there, but it is interfered with by the Vietnamese preoccupation with the person. In other words, there is a clash in the Vietnamese between two deeply implanted cultural values: harmony and personalism.

While the validity of such an interpretation is better left to cultural anthropologists and philosophers, it is useful to look at the particular Vietnamese behavior patterns and attitudes that have given rise to such an interpretation. In other words, let us look at the data rather than the theories, valid or non-valid.

Vietnamese we have consulted invariably point to the overseas Chinese, i.e.

those living outside of Taiwan and China, as possessing an admirable spirit of mutual trust, cooperation and unity which they themselves lack. The examples the Vietnamese use to illustrate this are difficult to check, but are abundant. They report that the overseas Chinese loan each other tens of thousands of dollars without a word being written down on paper, something they, the Vietnamese, are almost "constitutionally" unable to do; the Chinese in the Chinatowns all over the world take care of each other while the Vietnamese living outside of Vietnam reportedly don't. These and many other examples seem to us to point to something revealing. It is not that the Vietnamese do not value mutual trust and cooperation and unity. They would not have admired the Chinese so much, otherwise. It seems as if, while admiring these qualities, they do not know how to practice them.

In a study of a small and poor Vietnamese urban community in South Vietnam, two American sociologists reported a very low sense of public consciousness, and a very weak interest that bordered on indifference about matters that affected the viability of the community as a whole. In another study on Vietnamese values, conducted in 1968 by Human Sciences Research, Inc. and entitled 'Americans and Vietnamese: a Comparison of Values in Two Cultures', it is reported that the Vietnamese showed a very low peer-orientation, with the subsequent inference that "the collaborative tendency among the Vietnamese is weak." The American anthropologist James B. Hendry, in his study of a Vietnamese rural hamlet also reported a very scant display of community spirit among the hamlet residents. The level of tension and dissension that exists in any organization or group, Vietnamese or American, is reported to be higher in the Vietnamese and is observed to be based mostly on conflicts of personality and a certain inflexibility that makes compromise difficult to accept. Here, another important question can be asked. How is it that a presumably flexible and adaptable people cannot make compromise? Again experts refer us to the strong Vietnamese orientation toward personalism. And again, leaving philosophical interpretations alone, we see a contradiction in behavior, a clash of cultural values in the Vietnamese, just as is perceived to exist in other cultures. In fact, it's precisely these clashes and contradictions that, experts feel, lend depth to the understanding of a people's character.

The Vietnamese refugee resettlement program in the U.S. is run more by an idea, a concept, than by men. That concept is voluntarism. This voluntarism is embodied by the voluntary agencies such as the Church World Service, the U.S. National Catholic Conference, the International Rescue Committee, etc. In the light of the low sense of community spirit seen in the Vietnamese and reported

above, we can assume that the Vietnamese refugees are largely inexperienced in working within the framework of such a concept. Vietnamese informants usually raise a note of caution here. They point out that their people are not completely unfamiliar with voluntary organizations, since there are voluntary charitable organizations in their culture. But the Vietnamese practice voluntarism much less, and consequently are much less experienced at it than Americans are. Suspicions of the altruistic motives of the voluntary agencies as well as other negative views that may have been expressed by the refugees are better understood if seen in the light of such inexperience. The cultural root of such attitudes, of course, goes deeper: i.e., weak peer-orientation, born of a strong sense of personalism, in a heart-based culture. The Vietnamese refugees now live in a society which is almost diametrically the opposite, and therefore cross-cultural misunderstandings and conflicts are bound to occur.

A Note of Caution By Way of Conclusion

Someone once said that when you are in a forest you see only trees. Specialists in intercultural relations run the risk of seeing Vietnamese behavior solely in the light of cross-cultural differences, forgetting the personality traits that are embedded in them by their particular life experiences. Recently a Vietnamese refugee housewife was observed loudly protesting at a store over a merchandise exchange. "Where is her Confucian sense of propriety?" an American who had read the rough draft of this bulletin jokingly asked. "Confucius lost on that one," was the reply he got.

These personality traits, which are part of the uniqueness of each individual born on this earth, in addition to a host of other situational considerations, are what make Vietnamese react so differently to any given situation. Furthermore, when combined with the varying degrees in which a particular cultural value is absorbed by different individuals, personality traits make predicting the behavior of the Vietnamese, or of any other people for that matter, both a risky and foolish business.

A note of caution should also be sounded on the danger of stereotypes. Just as the Vietnamese refugees have stereotypical pictures of Americans, which will be altered only after a long residence in the U.S., Americans have stereotypical images of the Vietnamese, good and bad. They come from hearsay, things we have read, and isolated observations based on occasional encounters, from which we make generalizations. And generalizations about a people are risky when they

constitute the basis for action. An elderly American elementary school teacher in California who had difficulty disciplining the several Vietnamese children she had in her classroom was once heard to exclaim in frustration: "Why can't they behave like Vietnamese children for a change?" Clearly a stereotypical picture of a Vietnamese child had been planted in her mind. Perhaps a generalization to the effect that all Vietnamese children are quiet, polite, and obedient.

We can indulge in a little dialectic here. It has been said that 'all generalizations are false, including this one'. What that statement really means is that it, too, is false. And if that statement is false, then it follows that there are generalizations that are true. We hope this Refugee Education Guide, a product derived from many sources, has offered you not generalizations, however false or true, but some insights into that most fascinating but also most difficult subject of study, the Vietnamese character. In seeking to understand the Vietnamese, we again call your attention to the little Vietnamese saying:

Bi lâu mới biết đường dài,
Ở lâu mới biết con người phải chăng.

Just as the length of a road is known only by actually traveling on it,
The qualities of a man are known only by living with him for a long time.

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